

Shifting Gears

Posted on



Arosha Perera is the new face of Leo Burnett Sri Lanka, taking over the reins from Ranil de Silva after a two-year transition period. With an illustrious career in the international advertising and branding sector, Arosha Perera brings with him a vision to lead the industry's evolution and changing mind-set, and marks the beginning of a new era for the company. Integration, 'Humankind' and 'Media Neutral' ideas will be in the spotlight as Leo Burnett Sri Lanka shifts into a new gear.

By Keshini de Silva

Photography Menaka Aravinda

Who is Arosha Perera?

I have worked in the advertising and marketing industries for over 20 years, ten with three of the largest agency brands in Sri Lanka and the rest on assignments with JWT in Thailand, Mumbai, Shanghai and Singapore.

JWT was really my test bed, just as it was for my predecessor, where I spent close upon five years with JWT in Colombo before I was hand-picked by the regional management to join the Unilever regional team in Bangkok as Regional Account Director. At that time, the Unilever business was centralised in Thailand where a team of about 20 people from across Asia Pacific were brought together to manage the Unilever business. I immediately fell in love with Thailand. I called it home on and off for the next decade. In Bangkok, I managed projects that spanned South and South East Asia as well as the AMET region for three years before I was promoted.

Subsequently, I moved to JWT Shanghai as Group Account Director where I was responsible for a business team. That was a very special and challenging experience back in 2007 and 2008 in the period leading up to the Beijing Olympics. It was like I had set foot on a whole new planet. Multinational Companies (MNCs) were really trying to gain traction in the vast Chinese market. I worked on giant brands like Kellogg's, Perfetti Van Melle and Bosch.

As I had a long relationship with Unilever, so I was also entrusted with Knorr and a hair care brand called Hazeline. That was a big responsibility and a great learning experience. I had to quickly acclimatise myself into creating work for Chinese consumers as well as learn to deal with Chinese clients and colleagues. There was extensive travel involved but I did get to see their amazing country. In 2009, I returned to Bangkok and started working on projects for JWT Bangkok and Singapore in various capacities. My last assignment in 2013 was in the role of regional director in-charge of communication for Sunsilk in South Asia, based out of Singapore.

Thereafter, I represented MCA, a UK-based international consultancy as Asia Pacific Business Leader, based out of Bangkok. My task was to lead a team of in-market professionals to work with client marketing and procurement and their agencies to maximise the operating efficiency of the agency-client relationship. I managed the business in key markets such as Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia and China, working with clients such as Nestle, Colgate Palmolive, L'Oreal, Friesland Campina and BP, together with my counterparts in the UK.

It was at this point that Ranil De Silva brought up the opportunity of becoming his successor at Leo Burnett Sri Lanka. It was a wonderful opportunity to eventually lead Sri Lanka's trail blazing agency. His pitch convinced me to return home, as by then I had been away for 11 years. The move back was a few months in the making but I realised that if I was to come back home, there would be no better opportunity. So, in May 2015, I moved back and took up my role as Chief Operating Officer.

The entire process leading up to January 1, 2018 started back then on May 1, 2015. It was a process of getting to know the company, the business, people, and clients in a progressive way. I think it was very smart to have eased into the role in this manner. Starting off as Chief Operating Officer meant that I familiarised myself with all the operational areas first. I had the opportunity to meet all the Leo Burnett clients and work closely with them. Our people had the opportunity to get to know and trust me. More than two years in the making and we are ready to turn a new chapter at Leo Burnett. A young and dynamic team poised to write our own story!

On a personal note, I am an animal lover. My pet Persian cat is my stress buster and has been with me for ten years across three countries. Art and drama have also been my passion

since my school days at St. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia. I fully support all the projects and partnerships Leo Burnett is involved with on both these fronts.

My Role Is To Ensure That The Legacy Continues; That Our Clients Can Continue To Count On The Professionalism And Expertise They Have Come To Expect From Leo Burnett.

Tell us about taking your current role at Leo Burnett?

Leo Burnett is one of the largest and most successful agencies in Sri Lanka. We have been instrumental in building many successful brands and have built an enviable reputation locally and regionally in the last 18 years under the single leadership of Ranil De Silva. My role is to ensure that the legacy continues; that our clients can continue to count on the professionalism and expertise they have come to expect from Leo Burnett; that our people have the best opportunities and international exposure in order to continue performing to their full potential. But we will do this our way – in a way that empowers the agency to compete successfully over the next 18 years. I am ably supported by my leadership team that comprises some of the best senior talent in the industry. They have each earned their place on this team and are committed and empowered under a collective vision. Together we are confident about taking the best of our heritage and moulding it into Leo Burnett 2.0. We will transform into a truly integrated agency that is powered by 'Humankind', our proprietary approach to understanding people and their behaviour. This will be an unbeatable combination and will change the way we are perceived in this market.

You mentioned a desire to change the way the company is perceived. Could you tell a little bit about this?

The leadership change is a great opportunity to look at how the company needs to evolve. Our industry is rapidly changing and the agency needs to keep pace. We will no longer just focus on great ideas, but also on great media neutral, integration ideas that can deliver the ROI clients require. We are seeing a boom in investment in 'non-traditional' media, in innovation, in technology to engage people. We need to look at our entire business differently, be conscious of the evolution of the consumer and the opportunities opening up thereof. We are already making headway in this direction.

Could you elaborate on your focus in terms of business, the services you are going to offer going forward from here?

Today, our group comprises Leo Burnett and Publicis, which are creative agencies. Then, we have a fully-fledged digital engagement unit and MSL Group, which is one of Asia's leading PR companies. We have Arc Worldwide, which offers smart consumer engagement and we have Starcom, our media planning and buying arm. In addition, we have one of the most experienced audio visual and art production teams in the industry and our planning team is a driving force behind our work. Our growth engines will most definitely be Digital, Arc and MSL. We are ideally placed to offer clients integrated solutions to their business problems. Our ROI focus will ensure clients have a solid reason to partner with us.

What are your thoughts on the Sri Lankan sector? How does your international exposure fit into Leo Burnett?

The overseas markets I have worked in are ahead of ours because the consumer evolution is ahead. Brands rarely succeed in these markets unless they make significant investment in digital engagement. Integration is a given.

In a way, I have experienced what Sri Lanka will become in a few years during my stint in other advanced markets and understand the approach agencies and marketers will need to take in order to affect consumer behaviour. We are catching up fast. Today, investment growth in new media is outpacing that of the traditional space. We need media neutral ideas; we need to have ideas that can transcend boundaries. We need to change to survive and thrive.

I intend to use my international experience to help our team navigate this change successfully -to take this agency into the next decade with foresight.

The Future Is Actually Very Bright If You Focus Your Attention On Where Growth Will Come From. Today, There Are Certain Areas In Our Industry That Are Primed For Real Growth And That Is The Sweet Spot That We Are After. I Am Very Optimistic About The Future.

In terms of that change, what about the talent in the industry in Sri Lanka?

Finding and retaining the right talent is a challenge in our market. It is also a regional problem, but more acute here because the talent pool is that much smaller. It does not reflect a lack of creative people. It's just that creative people just have more career options.

When I joined this industry, if you wanted a creative career, then advertising was the obvious choice. But today, there are so many opportunities and our industry is having a tough time attracting its share of new talent. It's time for agencies to keep pace with millennials in the same way they need to keep pace with the evolving consumer. The young people in my office really buy into our new vision. They themselves are living such digitally engrossed lives, that it's easier for them to buy into it. I find that in the agency, the millennials, those under 30, are more receptive to the evolution we as an agency want to achieve.

Is the consumer market in Sri Lanka ready for this shift?

The consumer is already making this shift, slowly but surely. Successful marketers understand this. They are sitting up and taking notice. That's why you see more investment growth in these areas. The consumer is going to evolve whether we like it or not. If we want to succeed, we need to ride the wave.

After many years of management experience overseas you decided to come back at a time when the advertising industry is at a low. What was your motivation?

I returned to Sri Lanka for the opportunity to lead a team of bright young professionals into the next decade - to make this agency 'future ready' and capitalise on emerging opportunities. The future is actually very bright if you focus your attention on where growth will come from. Today, there are certain areas in our industry that are primed for real growth and that is the sweet spot that we are after. I am very optimistic about the future.

How do you attract talent to the industry?

This is a challenging task! It's no longer just about remuneration. Young talent wants to be able to do things that are stimulating and they want an environment that is stimulating to work in. If the company is unable to keep up with those changing needs, we will not be able to attract or hold them. There's a lot of specialisation too. Young people today have a clearer idea about what they want to do. The challenge is to make our industry and this agency a magnet for these people. Our industry needs younger minds - talent that thinks afresh, talent that can grasp the concept of integration. At Leo Burnett, we have several initiatives such as a robust year-round internship programme, our renowned masterclass programme, and our partnerships with colleges and universities which are aimed at fostering interest in our industry and channelling young talent towards it. We are certainly doing our bit.

Could you tell us about the Group?

Leo Burnett is part of the Publicis Groupe, the third-largest communications holding company in the world. As a result of group synergies, we are completely aligned to the network and have access to all the tools, resources, knowledge and expertise. The focus of the Group is also very much on integration, where we harness the depth and breadth of expertise throughout the network for clients.

We are an emerging market for the Group and we are punching above our weight in the region. Certainly, expectations from us are high to continue performing at the levels worthy of our 'Agency of the year' reputation. We are confident of meeting and exceeding these expectations.